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ABSTRACT

Effective communication and the human element are receiving increased emphasis during the 1990s. The communication process is a complex, foundational component within organizations, especially where participative management is practiced. Several models have been developed to describe the communication process; however, few models adequately depict the continuous multi-directional communication process and the effect of the participants' environments on the communication that occurs. The proposed Multidimensional Communication Paradigm displays the all-encompassing process. By understanding the many facets of the communication process, students and business workers can develop skills that not only improve communication, but also promote moral values and satisfaction in employees. (A figure illustrating the Multidimensional Communication Paradigm is included. Contains 14 references. (Author/RS)

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# The Multidimensional Communication Process:

# A Communication Paradigm for the 21st Century

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Abstract

Effective communication and the human element are receiving increased emphasis during this decade. The communication process is a complex, foundational component within organizations, especially where participative management is practiced. Several models have been developed to describe the communication process; however, few models adequately depict the continuous multi-directional communication process and the effect of the participants' environments on the communication that occurs. The proposed Multidimensional Communication Paradigm displays the all-encompassing process. By understanding the many facets of the communication process, students and business workers can develop skills that not only improve communication, but also promote moral values and satisfaction in employees.

# The Multidimensional Communication Process: A Communication Paradigm for the 21st Century

## Introduction

Government deregulation, technological improvements, increased mobility, international competition, and a changing work force have produced dynamic internal and external environments for many organizations. These factors are generating an acute awareness of the importance for effective internal and external organizational communication. Communication skills are directly related to productivity, job satisfaction, and team-building (Downs 1988); therefore, complete understanding of the communication environment is vital for success within organizations.

Barnard (1938) stated, "In the exhaustive theory of organization, communication would occupy a central place, because the structure extensiveness and scope of organization are almost entirely determined by communication techniques" (91). In the 1990's job market, the buzzword is "good communication skills"

("The Message" 1990). Writing, speaking, listening, and observing are the essential written, oral, and interpersonal skills. Communication is the catalyst for change at the interpersonal, organizational, and international levels. The communication process is depicted in several models which describe the dynamic relationship of communicators to each other and to their environments. These models can aid the novice manager in analyzing communication situations and potential problems within the organization's structure.

## Communication Process

The communication process involves encoding, transmission, decoding, and feedback. Encoding includes deciding what information to send and how to send it. Encoding also involves a purpose the sender wants to convey and how the sender thinks the message will be perceived. Thoughts, ideas, images, and facts are transmitted to the recipient in spoken, written, or graphic mode. Decoding is simply interpreting the information that is being received. Both encoding and decoding are based on a "code of past experience" (Gibson and Hodgetts 1991, 6) including conscious and unconscious memories that have been accumulated during a person's lifetime. These memories determine one's perception of the information and the message (Gibson and Hodgetts

1991). Two individuals' perceptions of the same incident are often dissimilar because selective attention determines how individuals view situations (Berko, Wolvin, and Curtis 1990). Feedback is an essential aspect of the communication process since ideas and thoughts must be expressed to keep dialogue and communication open (Hellriegel, Slocum, and Woodman 1983). Portraying all of these facets in one static model is a challenge that is still keeping theorists occupied. However, analyzing the various models in the dynamic business environment can assist the business student in understanding a communication problem and in preparing an appropriate solution. A second advantage for using the communication models is that it gives the manager a framework for analyzing current situations and taking preventive measures to avoid potential problems.

## Communication Theories and Models

Early communication models were primitive because they viewed communication as a one-way process and a simple sequence of steps. For example, Shannon and Weaver's classical Mathematical Theory of Communication model represents the simplest method of communication. Basically, the model describes the communication process as an information source which sends a message or signal to the recipient (Shannon and Weaver 1949). The

information or message is transmitted through a channel. This linear representation of communication omits a major component in the communication process--feedback (Rader and Kurth 1988).

Recent communication models include feedback and view the process as continuous. Simultaneous interaction is taking place and involves many factors when individuals communicate. Fisher (1981) explains that communication occurs in an environment where various factors influence the understanding. Organizational structure and group controls determine how individuals communicate within a group setting. Members are expected to follow the prescribed standards and norms; thus, these standards and norms control the communication. Management practices, procedures, rules, and policies are organizational factors that influence communication. The nature of the work and the task characteristics determine the amount and quality of communication. The organizational structure influences the linkage. Through these linkages and interdependencies, problem solving, decision making, control, and coordination may or may not be achieved effectively. Effective communication relationships must exist for teamwork to be productive (Downs 1988; Wells and Spinks 1989). Therefore, a system model where communication is a subsystem involving

organizational factors, task characteristics, environmental factors, and group controls and structure appears logical (Wells and Spinks 1989).

Wenburg and Wilmot (1973) describe an infinity-transactional model where communication is a continuous process of encoding and decoding. Past and present experiences affect the communication that occurs in the future.

Berko, Wolvin, and Curtis (1990) refer to a transactional model of communication. They do not define the communicators as senders or receivers, but they convey the idea that the message is being transacted simultaneously. Communicators are both senders and receivers concurrently. The foundation for this model comes from transactional analysis where the concept of stroking is essential. Stroking is positive communication or feedback that takes place between two or more individuals (Himstreet and Baty 1990) and should lead to mutual trust and understanding. Transaction is the means of sharing information which is essential for productivity in all organizations.

The Johari Window relates feedback, which is an integral aspect of communication, to human interaction. The concept promotes the theory that through positive feedback and communication, trust and openness will

develop among individuals. The creators of the Johari Window identify four areas: free or open, blind, hidden, and unknown (Himstreet and Baty 1990). The free or open area signifies what a person knows about him/herself and what others know about that person. The blind area represents knowledge that other people have about a certain individual but that individual is not aware of the situation. The hidden area represents a secret area or information that an individual knows about him/herself but others do not know. The unknown area represents the subconscious which is unknown to the individual and to others (Himstreet and Baty 1990).

As the open or free area widens, gaps in communication decrease and thus effective communication evolves. When individuals communicate and share ideas in the workplace, a trust relationship should develop between an employee and employer. The reciprocal sharing eventually develops the trust and openness and thus a more encompassing free and open area. The building of trust and openness is an essential element in participative management. Because of the relationship between communication and effective management, the communication theories must be examined in the context of participative management. This democratic form of management involves the individual in organizational

decision-making. Important in this participative process is an effective flow of communication. Contemporary theory examines the communication process as happening simultaneously where the communicators are senders and receivers and also encoders and decoders synchronously. Both verbal and nonverbal cues strive to clarify the meaning of the message; feedback is occurring while the individuals communicate. Each individual encodes and decodes messages based on his/her past experiences and communication skill.

## Proposed Communication Paradigm

Communication theorists agree that communication is a complex process that includes numerous dimensions; however, an accurate all-encompassing model of this many-faceted process is difficult to conceptualize. In Figure 1 the Multidimensional Communication Paradigm demonstrates that each individual draws from his/her unique psychological and physiological environment when transmitting and receiving messages. This psychological and physiological environment is displayed with the two overlapping small inner circles. These circles represent the past and present experiences of each individual, and the area of overlap includes the common experiences, beliefs, and values.

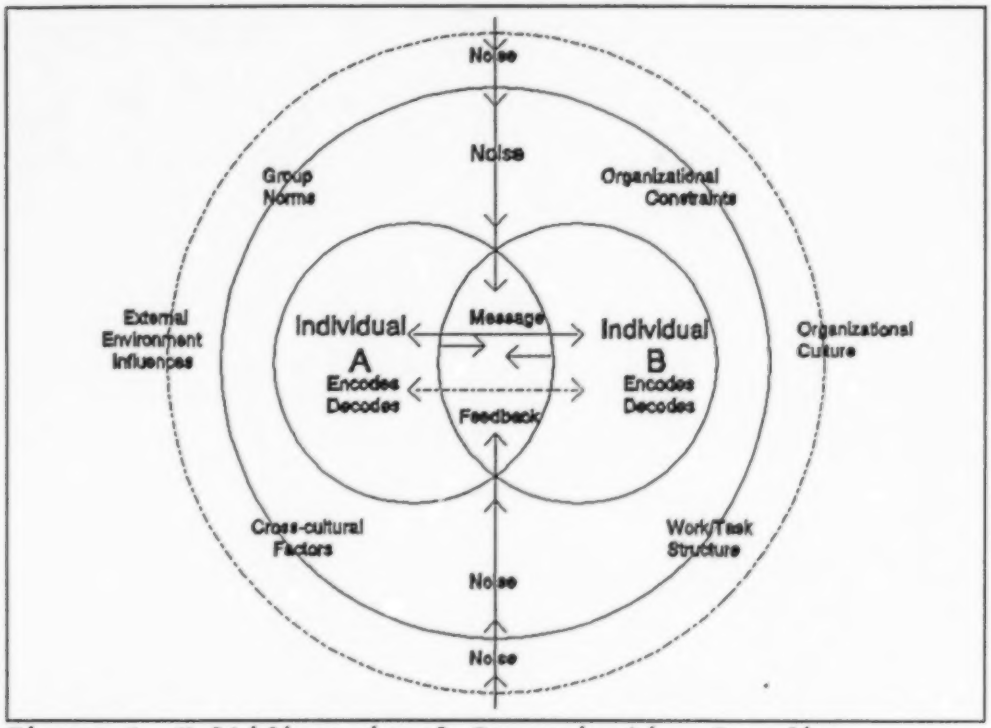


**Figure 1** Multidimensional Communication Paradigm

NOTE: Lines inside the small interlocking circles mean:

↔ = message is understood

→← = message was not understood

←—→ = message was only partially understood

During the simultaneous process of transmitting ideas, individuals perceive the messages differently because of noise and barriers. Noise is defined as any factor that interferes with the effectiveness of the communication process. Noise intervenes from several dimensions as is indicated by the two vertical lines that divide all the circles. Management must attempt to control the sources of noise (Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn 1991). Feedback--both verbal and nonverbal--



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indicate that some messages are understood with minimal noise or barriers; therefore, the true meaning of the message is understood by individuals. In other circumstances the message is distorted, as indicated by the broken line where the message undergoes selective filtering; thus, only part of the message is understood by both parties. The truncated lines show some messages are terminated before they reach the targeted recipient; selective listening or an emotional problem are examples. The next circle represents the principle that, when individuals communicate, they must also consider a larger environment involving organizational constraints, task/work structure, group norms, and cross-cultural factors. People need to know what is expected of them; role ambiguity can be stressful for everyone concerned. However, maintaining open and effective two-way communication will minimize ambiguity about task goals, deadlines, and performance accomplishments. In any environment the manager must be concerned with directing, controlling, and coordinating the work situation in which the communication process is the foundation. In the large outer circle, external environmental influences and organizational culture continue to influence the linkage and the quality of the understanding. During the communication process, trust and credibility must be

developed through feedback because the lack of interpersonal trust will affect the behaviors of people and the quality and the degree of communication (Friedlander 1970). Information may be withheld or distorted when trust is not present. Trust or the lack of trust is an important consideration in any organization's communication structure and subsequent success. Therefore, guidelines for organizations include the following:

1. The organizational structure should allow for a free flow of information at all levels inclusive of vertical and horizonal flow. All members of the organization should feel their ideas are given consideration.
2. Justifying reasons should accompany policies and procedures.
3. Through interpersonal communication an atmosphere of confidence and trust should prevail throughout the organization.
4. Managers and employees should be aware that communication is a continuous process. Networks should be established to facilitate the process and eliminate the noise and barriers that inhibit effective communications.

5. Effective human relation and communication skills should be practiced if participative decision making is the mode. Training in both verbal and nonverbal aspects may be necessary.

## Conclusions

Communication models have been developed from a simple linear model to an all-encompassing multidimensional paradigm. The function effective communication represents in participative management can be magnified many times. While transmission of complete and clear instructions has been and will continue to be extremely important, communication obviously has other dimensions as illustrated by the Multidimensional Communication Paradigm. During the 1990s the human element and communication ability will be emphasized. Increased productivity will result from high morale and satisfied employees through the development of trust relationships through effective communication.

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